

RECKLESS RALPH'S

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers. Published by Ralph F. Cummings, Box 75, Fisherville, Mass., U. S. A. Price \$1.00 per year or ten cents a copy.

Ad. rates—1c per word. 25c per inch (about 30 words), Quarter page \$1.00, Half page \$1.75, Full page \$3.00. Display adverts., 50c per inch. Four consecutive insertions for the price of three.

VOL. 6

JANUARY, 1938

No. 70

THE ADMIRABLE ARLINGTON

J. P. Guinon

In real life the villain is regarded with contempt by the righteous-minded and garners boos instead of bouquets, which is correct and proper. But in literature, especially sub-literature, he deserves and should get the praise that is his due for the performance of his part in the plot of the story. Much favorable, if tardy, publicity is being given these days to the heroes of dime and nickel novels; the Deadwood Dicks, Nick Carters and Frank Merriwells who performed great feats and deeds of heroism to thrill the boys (and men) of generations ago. But little credit, apparently, is accruing to the villains whose opposition to and much machinations against these great heroes so frequently provided the opportunity for said heroes to exhibit their nobility and prowess.

There are many very worthy and excellent villains who stalked the pages of the thrillers of past decades, contributing mightily to the excitement and suspense of the tales as their schemes were hatched and foiled. In most competent and interesting fashion they lost the girl, the gold, their liberty, and frequently their lives, getting nothing in return except ignominy, a lot of tough breaks and generally a beating-up by the hero. Without their co-operation the

stories would have been washouts and they should, now that their parts have been played and the final chapters written, receive a share of the favorable comment and attention that today is being distributed among the various supermen they so valiantly and intriguingly opposed.

Among the many deserving scoundrels of sub-literature one in particular is outstanding. Only those who know their novels are aware of his excellence and superiority. He never personally imparted the impetus to the knife or bullet that converted an enemy into cold meat, but his agile brain concocted many plots that resulted in, and directed the efforts of others who brought about, more than one such lamentable fatality without danger or dishevelment to himself. And in all lesser iniquities he was the absolute tops. His conscience seemed to have gone into permanent hibernation deep in his icy heart, and he recognized no law that was not in accord with his own desires. So well did he villainize, in fact, that he brought great popularity to a very mediocre hero, one Dick Merriwell; considerable added fame to an already famous publication, the Tip Top Weekly; plenty of jack into the strong-box of Street & Smith, publishers of Nickel and dime novels, and no doubt a justifiable feeling of pride to Gilbert Patten, the author whose capable brain conceived and brought forth this viper.

All honor to Chester Arlington, truly a villain of parts!

Arlington made his debut in Tip Top on October 4, 1902. The color cover novel was then approaching the height of its popularity, with Tip Top the original and king of them all, still leading the procession. Featuring the incomparable Frank Merriwell, this great weekly had inaugurated a new era in novels in 1896, and had definitely gone to town. Its gay cover and new type of story had made an instant hit, and knocked the props from under all other novels then being published, most of which, incidentally, were badly in need of propping; their readers weary of the same old plots they had been following for the past thirty years. Now, six years later, Tip Top was heading a list of a dozen colored-cover novels who had taken the field almost completely away from the black-and-whites.

But although still in front, Tip Top had lost some of its popularity, and was losing more with every issue. A year previously, Patten, feeling that he had about exhausted the possibilities of Frank Merriwell, introduced a new character designed to take the place of the Famous Frank; a half-brother, Dick Merriwell, who had been packed off to Fardale Military Academy to follow in his brother's footsteps. And Dick had flopped! In spite of his ability to create characters in his stories that seemed living persons to the readers, Patten had failed to put Dick over. Perhaps in his anxiety to replace the Faultless Frank with a worthy successor, he had tried too hard and over-reached himself. At any rate, in Dick he had produced a stiff, unnatural person; anti-social, somewhat priggish and utterly lacking in magnetism. Dick failed to arouse any great enthusiasm among the fans, and a year after his first appearance in Tip Top the readers were howling for the return of Frank and his friends. Many of them were deserting Tip Top and spending their nickels for other novels. The Grand Old Weekly was beginning to slip.

Then along came Arlington! He appeared almost unannounced in the pages of Tip Top No. 338 as a new student at Fardale, became Dick's enemy in the first chapter, and began his nefarious work without delay. In a few weeks his plots and schemes had established him solidly as a

knave of great promise. The majority of the readers accepted him at first with polite interest, which quickly changed to startled astonishment, and then, as Chester displayed greater and even greater potentialities as a scalawag, became one vast roar of anger. And no wonder! For, allying himself with Dick's principal enemies Arlington with his usual nerve, assumed their leadership, and with a versatility that seemed inexhaustible, bombarded Dick with a variety of annoyances that kept the amazed and irritated Merriwell humping energetically to preserve his honor, his leadership at Fardale, and even his life. Nor was this all! Chester, with devilish efficiency, seemed able, also, to find plenty of time to devote to Dick's chums, whom he harried unmercifully. Some of these were more popular with Tip Toppers than Dick himself, especially one Dave Flint, a protégé of young Merriwell's. Arlington took a particular delight in humiliating Dave at every opportunity, this increasing the fury of the readers. And in his spare time, this accomplished scamp plotted with and directed various thugs and cutthroats of the underworld, with the object of despoiling Frank Merriwell of his gold mines, the source of the Merriwell fortune.

Arlington climaxed his first year of anti-Merriwellism by dynamiting a mountain dam, releasing a vast wall of water which rolled over the little Western town of Lost Pocket, his amiable intentions being to wipe out, at one wipe, Dick and Frank Merriwell, the latter's fiancée, Inza Burage, and her chum, Elsie Bellwood, in addition to a host of their various and sundry friends and acquaintances. Of course, he failed to accomplish this heinous crime, but he came so close to it that some of the Tip Toppers haven't fully recovered to this day.

The uproar that arose from the Tip Top readers following the Lost Pocket incident was heard all over the novel world. That part of the Weekly known as the Applause column became a dozen columns as letters condemning Arlington poured in upon the publishers. These delighted gentlemen, trying to find room for at least a small percentage of the letters of execration aimed at the viper Arlington, who meanwhile smilingly continued his snaky schemings, gave up more and more space to the Vox Pop-

uli. Of course, with an astuteness that was to be expected, the publishers managed to find room for occasional letters praising Arlington's efforts, which letters increased the blood pressure of the loyal Tip Toppers, poured salt, so to speak, into their wounds and redoubled, if that were possible, their howls of rage. Not since the days of the unspeakable skunk, Sport Harris, who years before had harried Frank Merriwell all over two continents, had such a low-life appeared in the pages of Tip Top.

(Continued in Next Issue)

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